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ORCHESTRA

MSO by the numbers

Annual budget: $19 million (2005), 45 per cent from government funding.

Number of musicians: 92.

Musicians' salaries: $8.5 million.

Base musician's salary: $61,000 (20-per-cent less than that of the Toronto Symphony and National Art Centre Orchestra, according to union).

Average musician's salary: $75,000 (disputed by union).

Rank among North American orchestras, by critics: top 15.

Salary rank among North American orchestras: 34.

Accumulated deficit in 2004: $3.4 million; in 1999, it was $5.7 million.

MSO spectators in 2003-2004: 232,793 (including 182,793 in concert halls and 50,000 at free outdoor events).

MSO subscribers: 14,017.

Concerts in 2003-04: 119 (including 76 regular season and 16 summer season concerts, 10 with Opéra de Montréal, eight youth concerts, etc.).

Works performed: 144.

Conductors: 26.

National and international tours since 1962: 37.

Last international tour: 2000.

Recordings: 89 (with Decca, EMI, Philips and CBC).

Recordings since departure of Charles Dutoit: 0.

National and international awards: 47 (including two Grammies, 12 Junos and 8 Félix awards).

Total worth of musicians' instruments: $7 million.

First concert: January 14, 1935 (Plateau Hall at Lafontaine Park).

Collective agreement expired: Aug. 31, 2003.

Days on strike: 111.

Scheduled 2005-06 season opener: Sept. 20.

MSO STATISTICS, MAY 31, 2004

On the web

Scena.org
La Scena Musicale is a free Montreal-based classical music monthly, whose website features a treasure trove of articles from around the world, divided into pertinent sections: The future of classical music, crisis in the recording industry, music & science, philanthropy and, alas, the MSO strike.

Therestisnoise.com
A blog by a real writer, Alex Ross, the brilliantly enthusiastic classical music critic for the New Yorker. In addition to an archive of all his pieces (including those on Radiohead and Dylan), we follow his progress writing The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century. This cultural history ranges from Richard Strauss's Salome to Steve Reich's Music for Eighteen Musicians, "with digressions into ... the progressive musical policies of the U.S. Army's Division of Information Control, and the minimalist sources of the Velvet Underground."

Artsjournal.com/sandow and gregsandow.com
A composer, critic and music consultant in his early 60s, Greg Sandow teaches graduate courses on music criticism and the future of classical music at Juilliard. He writes about both – and more – online, inquisitively, with detail and whimsy, and a singular lack of condescension toward public tastes.

A monumental book

Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall (W.W. Norton & Company, $58), by Joseph Horowitz, is a sprawling work spanning 150 years, written with grace to match perception. Cultural history as a page-turner.

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

PHOTOS: RICHARD ARLESS JR. THE GAZETTE

MSO first violinist Marc Béliveau: "We want to be in a working environment where we are not stretched to the point where we break or quality suffers."

Classical buzz | Nagano adds excitement

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

"When he says he's been reading books and materials on Montreal to discover what the city needs and offers, he's not just saying that. His curiosity is very impressive." She adds, with a smile, that record companies have called. Above all, she says, "the MSO needs to travel."

In the present collective agreement, says management, the musicians are entitled to two days off per week when on tour; it is asking that they travel during one of these days off on two separate occasions during the five-year collective agreement. The union counters that the stress of travelling, rehearsing and performing on the same day will inevitably lead to a decline in quality.

A pay raise might make the musicians feel more valued, and give them parity with the orchestra members in Toronto and Ottawa, who are reported to make on average 20-per-cent more than the MSO musicians. While 45 per cent of the MSO budget comes from government grants, the Toronto Symphony raises all but 20 per cent of its budget from private sources. That has raised questions about the MSO's ability to market itself.

Marketing is a daunting challenge shared by all large orchestras in North America. (In postmodern lingo, classical music is dead white male Europeans – ew!) How do you market a music that seems impenetrable to those in a go-go whiz-bang world? Recent ideas include everything from video screens on stage and actors reading biographical notes on the composers to free Beethoven, T-shirts and pre-concert dinners.

The young critic Ross claims there are more professional musicians, more people going to classical concerts and far more composers than ever before. "But (the classical genre's) musical life lacks a centre. It exists off the radar screen of the major media. It's actually kind of exciting when you think about it. If I were in the business of marketing classical music to younger audiences, I'd make a virtue of this. Classical music is the new underground."

And the Montreal Symphony Orchestra has yet to mine that potential buzz.

Music man, union man

First violinist plays with passion – and pride

The so-called 20-hour workweek does not include practising, he notes, which often doubles the hours

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
SPECIAL TO THE GAZETTE

Marc Béliveau, first violinist of the MSO and its union spokesperson, dreamed of being a team player at the Montreal symphony since he was 14 years old. "It's a unique job where 100 people come together in complete synergy to create a moment. It's very special. I got hooked on doing things as a group, a teammate. I had opportunities to lead in smaller orchestras but I wanted to be part of a bigger, more impressive group."

If the work ethic is a trademark of the Montreal symphony, it's a personal thing with Béliveau. "My parents weren't wealthy, so they offered me music lessons that called on me to work every day, because they wanted to get every penny's worth from these lessons." So when conductors say the MSO plays better on the first reading than other orchestras play in concert, or critics in London claim they'd trade the three orchestras there for one with the MSO's work ethic, it hits home. He plays a violin once used by his grandfather.

But it's a job that requires ongoing practice, concentration and enduring the physical and mental stress that comes with it. That's a tough thing for Béliveau to explain to a public that reads of a 46-week contract for a 20-hour work week (including three hours and 20 minutes of paid break time), for a base pay of $61,000 (and an average salary of $75,000) with six weeks paid vacation. Not bad for practising an art form you love.

Béliveau, just turned 40, is built like an agile football lineman, with an easy-going laugh to match his relentless reminders of the tough side of being a member of the orchestra.

The so-called 20-hour workweek – which is divided into eight "services" (rehearsals or concerts) of two-and-a-half hours each – does not count the time practising at home, he says, which often doubles the workweek.

The cost of buying, maintaining and insuring an instrument averages out to $15,000 annually. The string section players, who make up 50 per cent of the orchestra and are habitually its lowest paid, bear the cost and maintenance of instruments that can cost anywhere from $40,000 to several hundred thousand. Horns are much cheaper, but must be replaced every five years or so.

And then there is "stress," a concept Béliveau says is hard to pinpoint. "You kind of feel antsy, you're always worrying about the upcoming moment, about being with the group. As my violin teacher told me, 'Better never than late!'

"Certain soloists, depending on the piece and circumstances, may suffer a kind of stage fright, but it certainly doesn't sound like it."

Orchestra members go through an audition process – anonymously, hidden from the judges by a screen – that is stress incarnate: "Basically you have to show 20 or 25 years of knowledge in about 10 minutes. You've got three hours of music to learn and they'll ask you to play anywhere in the music."

The competition is fierce: There were 5,000 music graduates chasing 250 orchestral openings in 2000, notes former oboist Blair Tindall in Mozart in the Jungle: Sex, Drugs and Classical Music (Grove Atlantic Press), a book that's raised eyebrows in the classical music community with tales of musicians using beta-blockers and other pharmaceuticals. (Béliveau says he knows very few musicians who pop pills to cope with stress.)

As for repetitive strain injuries, Béliveau says that "every instrument has its different side effects. People get tense, and sometimes they develop bursitis or tendinitis in the wrist, elbow, shoulder, back, neck. I don't want to overstate it, and it's part of our profession, but we want to be in a working environment where we are not stretched to the point where we break or quality suffers." That's why string players get eight "services" off, or about a week a year.

An orchestral musician is always "on," says Béliveau. "The stress is you can never turn the machine off, you never say my week is done, I can relax now. We always have to stay in shape on our instrument, and think ahead to the next program." (One solution, he suggests, is cutting the number of programs by 10 or 15 from the present 90 or so, while maintaining the same performance schedule.)

Béliveau knows the score on touring: "Tours are expensive, and the more performances you give the more chance for a profit." But he cannot accept the MSO administration's demand for dispensations that permit musicians to travel to a city in the morning, rehearse in the afternoon, and perform a concert that night.

In the real world, time is money and everybody's squeezed. "I know the sharks' motives, and I don't expect them to be on the side of music," recently wrote Mark Swed, music critic for the Los Angeles Times. "But I do expect musicians to be on the side of music. One of the best things about music is that its most devoted practitioners have, throughout history, found ways to keep their art alive and thriving, whatever the obstacles."

However, says Béliveau, the exceptions that the musicians make to create the music possible "cannot become the rule."

Béliveau's violin once belonged to his grandfather.

STRIKE UPDATE

Musicians, management still far apart

The musicians of the Montreal Symphony Orchestra – represented by the Quebec Musicians' Guild (Local 406), part of the American Federation of Musicians of the U.S. and Canada – have been on strike since May 9, with the 2005-06 season opener set for Sept. 20.

The provincial government mediator, Richard Champagne, is on vacation until the end of August, as is MSO chairperson Lucien Bouchard. The two sides are far apart, and negotiations have been described as "tumorous."

Management wants "flexibility" over arrangements for hours and recordings, and fiscal restraint. It is offering musicians a 7.7-per-cent raise over seven years.

The union characterizes its offer as keeping pace with inflation – after agreeing to a salary freeze over the past two years – but it has been reported as amounting to a 45-per-cent increase. The musicians' union also maintains the quality and reputation of the orchestra is at stake in what they claim is management's squeeze on touring and recording time. Management rejected the union's last offer on July 28, and negotiations ended abruptly.

Kent Nagano, the MSO's exciting new musical director designate, is scheduled to conduct the first of 11 concerts this season on Oct. 23. (Meanwhile, the Montreal Canadiens exhibition season starts on Sept. 18.)

JUAN RODRIGUEZ

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